Almost every one of the literary types of the Old Testament has its prototype in the ancient Near Eastern literature. Law, epic, historiography, psalms, wisdom, all of them are established literary genres in the civilization of Mesopotamia and Egypt. Furthermore in some cases it is even possible to prove direct dependence of the Biblical creation upon foreign sources as for example in the case of Prov. xxii 17-xxiii 11 which is dependent on the Proverbs of Amen-em-opet. The only exception is Classical Prophecy which has always been considered an original creation of ancient Israel. Indeed there is no doubt that the religious moral pathos pervading classical prophecy as well as the prophetic ideas about the end of idolatry, universal peace and world salvation, reflects the genuine spirit of classical prophecy. The question is whether the literary conventions out of which classical prophecy has been formed were unique. Now, close investigation and constant follow-up of the ever growing literature of the ancient Near East show that basic forms as well as basic motifs of classical prophecy are rooted in the ancient Near-Eastern literature, and it is my purpose to illustrate and exemplify this thesis.

Let us start with a problem which lies at the roots of classical prophecy: the prophet as a messenger. Y. Kaufmann, for example, argued that the characteristic feature of the Israelite prophet was his total dependence upon God; he was a messenger sent to Israel by God in contrast to the pagan prophet who acted by a divine power which had become embodied in him 1). Now, the Mari texts from the 18th century B.C. which have been published in the last decades revealed to us a type of prophet-messenger not unlike the one familiar to us

from ancient Israel ²). As A. Malamat has indicated, we find there
the god Dagan sending prophets to convey messages to the King,
and as in Israel the messages were delivered by means of prophetic
frenzy ³) (cp. ARM II 90:19; III 40:13; Rev. Ass. 42 (1938), I.32) ⁴).
W. L. Moran, however, still argues that the “mission” in Mari is
secondary and even incidental ⁵). But in respect to this problem
attention should be paid to some key terms or conventions which
are decisive. In the revelation of Dagan to Malikdagan his prophet
we find a messenger-formula verbally identical with the mission-
formula found in Exod. iii 10 in the vision of the burning bush.
There we read w'tb lkh w'rṣlḥk l prḥ “Now go, I send you to
Pharaoh”, and in the revelation to Malikdagan ⁶): inanna alik aṣtaparka
ummanī...? “Now go I send you, thus say”... A similar convention
is attested in the revelation to Isaiah: ‘t my ‘ṣlh wmy ylk lnu “whom
shall I send and who will go for us?” (vi 8). This convention is found
in the Akkadian Maqlu text and there also in connection with
imposing a mission upon a man by the supreme gods Anu and Antu:
mannu luṣpur “whom shall I send?” ⁸), which shows that the type of
divine messenger was prevailing for a long time in Mesopotamia
(cp. also Jer. i 7; Ezek. ii 3 ff.).

Signs and portents

In connection with his mission Moses is given signs or portents:
‘nṭl (Ex. iv 1 ff., 21; vii 8 f.). These also play an important role in

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²) Cp. A. Malamat, “Propheṭic Revelations in New Documents from Mari

³) Compare the m̄uḥham in Mari whose function overlaps that of the Hebrew
m̄šg (= m̄tx̄) (Jer. xxix 16, Hos. ix 7), and see Malamat, pp. 210-211,
and note 4. m̄ṣȳ in Akkadian is wind or storm, and the verb m̄aṣȳ in the Nif’al
form: n̄m̄ȳ (cp. ARM X. 7:6; 8:7) equals ḥ̄ȳ b̄ ḥ̄w̄ b̄ = h̄m̄h). ⁴

⁴) Cp. A. Malamat, p. 221.

⁵) W. L. Moran, “New Evidence from Mari on the History of Prophecy”,
Bibliotheca 50 (1969), p. 26, n. 2. In a sense Moran strengthens Kaufmann’s position;
see esp. Kaufmann’s reaction to the Mari discoveries in Religion of Israel, p. 215, n. 1.

⁶) RA 42 (1938), line 32.

⁷) From the grammatical point of view aṣtaparka equals šlḥytk (as in v. 12)
and not ‘ṣlḥk. Functionally however there is no distinction, both refer to the
present. aṣtaparka as well as aṣp̄arka both express the Koinzidenzfall: “I hereby
send you” (see Heimpel-Guidi ZDMG 17 (1968), pp. 151 f.), and the same
applies to the Hebrew šlḥytk compare e.g. in the message to Gideon (Judg. vi
14): lk ... b̀ ḥ̄ȳ t̄ȳ k.